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Admiral misunderstands role of a free press

Admiral Stansfield Turner stirred a hornet's nest the other day when he informed the American Society of Newspaper Editors that he intends to enlist journalists in secret missions abroad when he thinks it necessary.

We regret that a man of the educational background of Admiral Turner should be so deficient in his understanding of the role of a free press in a free society that he fails to see the damage he has done with his remark. By speaking so, the admiral has done serious damage to the reputation of the American press, even if he never tries to recruit a single

newsman or if no one succumbs to his blandishments.

Reason for this is two-fold:

- Appearances often count for more than reality.

- A free press, constitutionally protected by the Founding Fathers in the First Amendment, has a role to play that is as important as the role of the military or the espionage services.

Taking these points in order, no matter how free a press is, if people perceive it to be the handmaiden of the government, or a particular administration, its honestly reported stories are of no value. Its credibility is damaged and whatever advantage our free society would ordinarily have over communist dictatorships is instantly lost.

Secondly, America is having trouble enough now being respected in many places on this earth. But even the Ayatollah Khomeini has sufficient respect for the freedom of the American press to permit our reporters and television people to operate in relative freedom. Khomeini also realizes that an untrammelled press will give him a fair shake.

Let us suppose, though, that the

authorities in some foreign land begin restricting the movements of American reporters or denying them visas because of an inappropriate remark by the head of our CIA. All the hypothetical spies in the world that Admiral Turner hopes to recruit from the journalistic profession wouldn't make up for one closed door.

Let us also consider the amount of damage Admiral Turner already has done through his ill-considered remark. We are sure that the propaganda mills of countries that wish us ill are already digesting the CIA's thoughts and will present them at the proper moment as proof that all American visitors are spies. They

do this anyway — witness the Iranian description of our embassy as "a nest of spies." We certainly don't need help from Admiral Turner to give credence to this type of anti-American thinking.

A free press serves a free society, as significantly in its way as the men who man the military outposts of the free world. Justice Hugo Black once noted that the free press is "one of the very agencies" the Founding Fathers "thoughtfully and deliberately selected to improve our society and keep it free." It is a pity that a man as high in our government as Admiral Turner apparently cannot understand this principle.